اِنَّ هٰذَا الْقُرْاٰنَ يَهْدِيْ لِلَّتِيْ هِيَ اَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِيْنَ الَّذِيْنَ يَعْمَلُوْنَ الصّٰلِحٰتِ اَنَّ لَهُمْ اَجْرًا كَبِيْرًا

Quran English Translation and Tafseer
Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi
Surah 105 – Al-Fil (The Elephant)

سُوْرَةُ الْفِيْلِ مَكِّيَّةٌ

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

(In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate)

اَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِاَصْحٰبِ الْفِيْلِ ١

(105-1) Have you not seen [1] how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephants? [2]

(1) Though the address apparently is directed to the Prophet (peace be on him), its real addressees are not only the Quraish but all the people of Arabia, who were well aware of the event. At many places in the Quran the words alam tara (have you not seen) have been used, and they are meant not to address the Prophet (peace be on him) but the people in general. (For example, see (Surah Ibrahim, Ayat 19); (Surah Al-Hajj, Ayats 18, 65); (Surah An-Noor, Ayat 43); (Surah Luqman, Ayats 29, 31); (Surah Fatir, Ayat 27); (Surah Az-Zumar, Ayat 21). Then, the word seeing has been used here to signify that in and around Makkah and in the vast country of Arabia, from Makkah to Yaman, there were many such people still living, who had witnessed with their own eyes the event of the destruction of the people of the elephant, for it had occurred only about forty to forty-five years earlier, and the people of Arabia had continually heard it described by the eye-witnesses themselves so that they had become so certain of it as though they had seen it with their own eyes.

(2) Here, Allah has not given any detail as to who were the people of the elephant, wherefrom they had come and what was the object of their march, for all these things were well known among the people.

اَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِيْ تَضْلِيْلٍ ٢

(105-2) Did He not bring their plan [3] to naught? [4]

(3) The word kayd is used for a secret plan meant to harm somebody. The question is what was secret in this case? Sixty thousand troops together with several elephants had openly come from Yaman to Makkah, and they had kept no secret that they had come to destroy the Kabah. Therefore, there was nothing secret about this plan. However, what was secret was the motive of the Abyssinians. They by destroying the Kabah, crushing down the Quraish and intimidating the Arabians, wanted to take control of the trade route that led from south Arabia to Syria and Egypt. This motive they kept hidden, and instead proclaimed their intent that they wanted to destroy the Kaabah, the principal House of Arab worship, in retaliation for the pollution of their cathedral by the Arabs.

(4) Literally, fi-tadlil means: led their plan astray, but idiomatically leading a plan astray means bringing it to nought and rendering it fruitless. At one place in the Quran, it has been said: But the disbelievers' plot (kayd) ended in vain. (Surah Al-Momin, Ayat 25), At another: And that Allah does not lead to success the plan (kayd) of deceivers. (Surah Yousuf, Ayat 52). The Arabians described Imra ul-Qais by the epithet of al-malik ad-dalil (the king who lost and wasted), for he had lost the kingdom left by his father.

وَّ اَرۡسَلَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ طَيۡرًا اَبَابِيۡلَ ۙ﴿۳﴾

(105-3) And He sent against them swarms of birds (5)

(5) Ababil means many separate and scattered groups whether of men or other creatures, which come from different sides successively. Ikrimah and Qatadah say that these swarms of birds had come from the Red Sea side. Saeed bin Jubair and Ikrimah say that such birds had neither been seen before nor ever after; these were neither birds of Najd, nor of Hijaz, nor of Timamah (the land between Hijaz and the Red Sea). Ibn Abbas says that their beaks were like those of birds and claws like the dog's paw. Ikrimah has stated that their heads were like the heads of the birds of prey, and almost all the reporters agree that each bird carried a stone in its beak and two stones in its claws. Some people of Makkah had these stones preserved with them for a long time. Thus, Abu Nuaim has related a statement of Naufal bin Abi Muawiyah, saying that he had seen the stones which had been thrown on the people of the elephant; they equaled a small pea seed in size and were dark red in color. According to Ibn Abbas's tradition that Abu Nuaim has related, they were equal to a pine kernel, and according to Ibn Marduyah, equal to a goat's dropping. Obviously, all the stones might not be equal but differing in size to some extent.

تَرۡمِيۡهِمۡ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّنۡ سِجِّيۡلٍ ۙ﴿۴﴾

(105-4) which smote them with stones of baked clay, (6)

(6) Literally, bi hijarat-im-min sijjil means stones of sijjil type. Ibn Abbas says that sijjil is the Arabic version of the Persian sang and gil, and it implies the stones made from clay and become hard when baked. The Quran also confirms the same. In (Surah Houd, Ayat 82) and (Surah Al- Hijr, Ayat 74), it has been said that stones of baked clay (sijjin were rained on the people of Lot, and about the same stones in (Surah Adh-Dharuyat, Ayat 33), it has been said that they were the stones made from clay (hijarat-im min tin).

Hamid-ad-Din Farahi, who in the present age has done valuable work on the research and determination of the meaning and content of the Quran regards the people of Makkah and other Arabians as the subject of tarmihim in this verse, who are the addressees of alam tara. About the birds he says that they were not casting stones but had come to eat the dead bodies of the people of the elephant. A resume of the arguments he has given for this interpretation is that it is not credible that Abdul Muttalib should have gone before Abrahah and demanded his camels instead of pleading for the Kabah, and this also is not credible that the people of Quraish and the other Arabs who had come for Hajj, did not resist the invaders and leaving the Kaabah at their mercy had gone off to the mountains. Therefore, what actually happened was that the Arabs pelted the army of Abrahah with stones, and Allah by sending a stormy wind charged with stones, destroyed it completely; then the birds were sent to eat the dead bodies of the soldiers. But, as we have already explained in the Introduction, the tradition does not only say that Abdul Muttalib had gone to demand his camels but it says that he did not demand the camels at all but tried to dissuade Abrahah from attacking the Kabah. We have already explained that according to all reliable traditions, Abrahah's army had come in Muharram when the pilgrims had gone back and also it was beyond the power of Quraish and other Arab tribes living in the surrounding areas to resist and fight an army 60,000 strong. They had hardly been able to muster a force ten to twelve thousand strong on the occasion of the Battle of the Trench (Ahzab) with the help of the Arab pagans and Jewish tribes then how could they have mustered courage to encounter an army, 60,000 strong? However, even if all these arguments are rejected and the sequence of the verses of Surah Al-Feel only is kept in view, this interpretation is seen to go against it. If it were so that the stones were cast by the Arabs and the people of the elephant were rendered as chaff, and then the birds came to eat their dead bodies, the order would be this: You were pelting them with stones of baked clay, then Allah rendered them as chaff eaten up, and then Allah sent upon them swarms of birds. But here we see that first Allah has made mention of sending swarms of birds; this is immediately followed by tarmihim bi-hijarat-im min-sijjil (which

were pelting them with stones of baked clay); and then at the end it is said that Allah made them as straw eaten up.

فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ ﴿١٠٥﴾

(105-5) and made them like straw eaten up (by cattle). (7)

(7) The word asf as used in the original has already occurred in Verse 12 of Surah Ar-Rahman: dhul-asf warraihan: and corn with husk as well as grain. This shows that asf means the outer covering of seeds, which the farmer throws away after the grain has been separated from it. Then the animals eat it, and some of it falls down in the chewing and some is trampled under the hoofs.